

# Mesopotamian and Persian migrations

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Migration is a phenomenon that was frequently adduced in 19th and early 20th-century archaeological and historical literature as an explanation for the diffusion of specific cultural traits, such as pottery styles. The fact that written (epigraphic or literary) confirmation of migration was in almost every case lacking, combined with the probability that alternative explanations (trade, artistic influence of one area on another, changing fashions) could account for the appearance of similar material culture in widely separated locales, meant that such diffusionist explanations went out of fashion after the mid-20th century. Having said that, migration undoubtedly did occur in some situations, even though documentary evidence is lacking.

## Agriculture and colonized lands

Early agriculturalists almost certainly colonized new lands (even if already occupied by hunter-gatherers) to exploit favorable ecological conditions; drought and disease may well have driven people from their home territories to new areas, a phenomenon well attested in more recent times and one which undoubtedly accounts for the many instances observed by archaeologists of the cyclical abandonment of sites and/or entire regions (e.g. Stone 2002). What archaeologists are prone to deem 'discontinuities' in Antiquity rarely, except in cases of plague, reflected the demise of an entire population. Rather, discontinuities in the archaeological sequence of a site or region – evidence of occupation in one period, absence of occupation in the next, followed by reoccupation centuries or even millennia later – almost

certainly reflect intermittent abandonment and emigration to new settlements, whether near or far. Proxy data (climatic/environmental, biological/pathological) may suggest the reasons behind such discontinuities and the motivations for putative migrations, but without written evidence arguments over the whys and wherefores of migration in prehistoric or ahistoric situations can never be resolved.

## *Ancient Near East*

To cite just a few examples from the ancient Near East, the appearance on sites in southern Anatolia, northern Syria, and northern Iraq of material culture (ceramics, cylinder seals, decorative wall cones, and sometimes proto-cuneiform tablets) that is southern Mesopotamian in style (of Middle and Late Uruk type, c.3700–3300 BCE) has been widely interpreted as evidence of a phenomenon of migration and colonization (e.g. Potts 2004 with earlier bibliography; Algaze 2005). New foundations on virgin ground with no connection to antecedent local traditions (e.g. Habuba Kabira South, Tell Kannas, Jabal Aruda on the Middle Euphrates in Syria) have been interpreted as true colonies emanating from a southern urban center, most probably Uruk (modern Warka, in southern Iraq). More than forty years of research on this topic, however, has failed to account for why such a pattern of migration took place, though a host of different explanations have been suggested (flight from oppressive conditions, desire to bring new agricultural lands under cultivation, interest in the mother settlement of the colony in establishing a network of sites capable of procuring desirable natural resources, etc.). Similarly, the appearance of a Transcaucasian type of pottery (Khirbet Kerak or Red Black Burnished Ware) at sites in Israel and Syria during the mid-3rd millennium BCE may reflect an actual migration of peoples from the area of modern Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, but other explanations are

possible, even in cases where the actual ceramics can be shown to have been manufactured in the Caucasus.

### ***Evidence of Mesopotamian migration***

Linguistic evidence has frequently been adduced to demonstrate early migration, though this too can be ambiguous. Changing frequencies of names, for example, increasing numbers of individuals with Akkadian (an East Semitic dialect) names in the 3rd millennium BCE, and Amorite (a group of West Semitic dialects) in early 2nd millennium BCE Mesopotamia (Lemet 1995), have been interpreted as evidence of a steady immigration of new peoples, largely from the Syrian steppe to the west of the Euphrates river, to southern Mesopotamia. Similarly, the appearance of individuals in southern Mesopotamia with Kassite names (a non-Semitic and non-Indo-European language with no known affinities) in the mid-2nd millennium BCE, has been interpreted as evidence of a migration from the presumed (but hypothetical) Kassite homeland, in the western Zagros region of Iran (Heinz 1995). Likewise, the increased usage of Aramaic for writing and Aramaic names, both in Assyria and Babylonia, have been taken as signs of progressive migration by Aramaeans from the Syrian steppe into the Tigris-Euphrates valley in the early 1st millennium BCE (Fales 2007). Even though these posited movements took place in periods for which we do have written sources, they are not recorded explicitly as migration events or episodes. Rather, the “evidence” is a combination of absence + presence: in one period, such names are absent; in the succeeding period, such names are present; *ergo* a migration must have occurred.

The nature of most of the extant written sources from the 3rd, 2nd and 1st millennia BCE is such, however, that voluntary, peaceful migration is unlikely to have ever been recorded, while not absolutely out of the question. In the overwhelming majority of economic, religious, scholarly, and legal texts there is simply no occasion to note migration. On the other hand, military campaigns are recorded in royal inscriptions and even if these

were sometimes characterized by hyperbole (e.g. the number of enemy combatants killed, the dread inspired in the enemy by the victorious king), their veracity is often assured by contemporary economic texts such as lists of rations given to semi-free workers and slaves (prisoners of war) with foreign names. Such texts undoubtedly reflect reality, as do laconic records noting when a worker fled from his work detail or a slave escaped the house of his master (Lemet 1995; Snell 2001).

### **Empire and deportation**

With the rise of the Neo-Assyrian empire in the 9th century BCE forced deportations for political purposes began to be used as a tool of political, military, and economic policy. On the one hand, deportations were intended to break resistance amongst subject peoples, depopulate areas thought to be a threat to Assyrian interests, and diffuse the military capacity of rival powers and polities. On the other hand, deportations were sometimes intended to harness human resources in the service of Assyria, whether of skilled craftsmen or of entire communities transplanted to regions that the Assyrians sought to develop agriculturally (Oded 1979). At its height in the 7th century the Assyrian empire extended from Egypt and the Mediterranean coast in the west to the foothills of the Zagros mountains in the east, and deportations occurred in all directions, involving hundreds (e.g. 160 people deported from Si’imme, north of modern Nusaybin in southeastern Turkey, to Assyria; Garelli 1995: 80) and in some cases thousands (e.g. 90,580 people deported from Bit Yakin in southern Babylonia to Melidi and Kummukh in Turkey; Na’aman and Zadok 1988: 44) of deportees (Akkadian *šaglû*) (Garelli 1995).

In some cases we have literary, annalistic historical evidence from the Assyrians that is corroborated by sources stemming from the subject peoples themselves. This applies, for example, to Assyrian accounts of Elamites from southwestern Iran deported to Egypt, Samaria in Israel, and Assyria (Potts 1999). The deportations to Samaria are echoed in Ezra 4:

9–10. Recently discovered texts from Tell Shaikh Hamad (ancient Dur-Katlimmu) on the Khabur river in Syria, moreover, attest to the presence of Elamites there in 602–600 BCE. This is well after the fall of the Assyrian empire and one may presume that these were the descendants of Elamites deported by the Assyrians 50–100 years earlier. Such groups, if given land to work, and with the passage of time, were probably not interested in returning to their original homeland, particularly after the passage of several generations (with attendant changes of language, culture, and intermarriage, one might also suggest).

With respect to Israel and Judah, of course, the effect of both Assyria and Babylonia on the region's population is well documented in Assyrian and Babylonian sources as well as the Bible. Isaiah presents an image of an efficient, overwhelmingly powerful Assyria devouring Israel (Machinist 1983) and when Isaiah says, "And I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and plundered their treasures" (Isaiah 10: 13b), it is not just the political boundaries of Assyria's enemies that have been eradicated as region after region was conquered, but the human ones as well, such that deportation with its mixing of peoples became a consequence of the lack of internal boundaries within the empire. But there were deportations to Israel and Samaria as well, for example, from Kharkhar, Kishesim, Karalla, and Uishdish in Media (western Iran), and north Arabia. Some of these deportees were settled on the border with Egypt (Na'aman and Zadok 1988).

As Sargon II boasted after his conquest of Ashdod in 712 BCE, "I reorganized (the administration of) these cities and settled therein people from the [countries] of the east which I had conquered" (Na'aman and Zadok 1988: 43). The Babylonian exile of the Jews is, of course, one of the most famous deportations in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This was less an event than a process, beginning with Israel's transformation into an Assyrian vassal under Tiglath-Pileser III (r.745–727 BCE). Deportations in his reign are recorded in 2 Kings 15: 29 and 1 Chronicles 5: 26, while 2 Kings 17: 6 and 18: 11 record Sargon II's deportations of

Israelites to Syria (on the Khabur river) and Media (western Iran) following the capture of Samaria (Younger 1988). A Babylonian chronicle gives 2 Adar in the 7th year of Nebuchadnezzar II's reign (15/16 March 597 BCE) as the date of the capture of Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24: 10–17) and the fall of Jerusalem which initiated the Babylonian exile (cf. 2 Chron. 36: 10) (Grayson 2000). The different destinations of various deportee groups, and their subsequent fates, varied from case to case depending on factors such as the degree of resistance shown by the subject people, their economic talents (e.g. olive oil production, weaving, metalwork, ivory carving) and the economic aims that the Assyrians hoped to achieve by introducing new settlers in different parts of the empire (Younger 1998).

### Persian geographic expansion and migration

The policies of the Assyrians and Babylonians were familiar to and adopted by their immediate political successors, the Achaemenid Persians. Following the Persian conquest of Egypt in 525 BCE Cambyses deported 6,000 Egyptians to Susa in southwestern Iran (Ctesias, *Persica* F13.10; Diodorus Siculus 1.46.4), an ancient city (founded c.4000 BCE) and major administrative center in Iran. The fact that Cambyses is said to have chosen the 6,000 deportees himself suggests a clear motive, though what this might have been is not recorded. Like the Assyrian deportations, those carried out by the Persians were far flung: north African Barcaeans (from Barca in Cyrenaica, modern Libya) were resettled in Bactria (today northern Afghanistan/southern Uzbekistan); Milesians from western Asia Minor were established at Ampe, near the mouth of the Tigris in southern Iraq; Eretrians from the coast of Euboea in Greece were shifted to Ardericca in Kissia, a region in southwestern Iran; and Boeotians from Greece were installed on the Tigris (Herodotus, *Histories* 4.204; 6.20; 6.119; Diodorus Siculus 17.110).

The case of the Eretrians recalls that of the Elamites in Syria. These were captured in 490

BCE shortly before the Battle of Marathon. Deported initially to Susa, they were resettled by Darius at Ardericca and Herodotus, writing about fifty years later, noted that “they have held this territory up until my time and have preserved their ancient language” (Herodotus, *Histories* 6.119; cf. Grosso 1958). In the long inscription commemorating the building of his palace at Susa, Darius I referred to the nationalities of the many different craftsmen employed on the project (Assyrians, Carians, Greeks, Medes, Egyptians, Lydians, Babylonians; see Lecoq 1997). Although these have been interpreted as deportees (Shahbazi et al. 1994), there is no indication that this was the case.

### *Policies of deportation*

Attitudes towards deportation in the Parthian period (c.145 BCE–224 CE) were somewhat different and, for the most part, involved prisoners of war who had been combatants, rather than civilians. Thus, for example, after the Parthian defeat of the Romans at Carrhae (modern Harran, in southeastern Turkey) in 53 BCE, some 10,000 Roman soldiers were captured (Plutarch, *Crassus* 31.7) and sent to Alexandria Margiana (a city founded by Alexander the Great nearly three hundred years earlier; modern Merv in Turkmenistan) where, according to Horace (3.5.5–8), they intermarried with native women and took up service on behalf of the Parthians. Again the motivation is not stated but such a settlement could have served two purposes. On the one hand, it shifted the surviving Roman forces far from their own frontier, thus eliminating any possibility of their easily escaping and returning to fight for Rome. On the other hand, it may have provided a bulwark against nomadic incursions from the Eurasian steppe, a constant problem on the Parthians’ eastern frontier. It must also be borne in mind, when considering the possibilities of such a change of allegiance on the part of these captives, that we do not know the ethnicity of the soldiers involved. Although identified as “Roman,” they almost certainly included non-Roman legions which could have come from many different parts of North Africa, Europe, and/or the Near East. As Plutarch recounts that the Parthian general Surena

did not harm those who surrendered voluntarily, a change of allegiance, with a continuation of a military career in Parthian service, is not difficult to imagine.

Tigranes the Great (c.95 BCE), king of Armenia, is said by Strabo (*Geography* 11.14.15) to have populated his new capital, Tigranocerta (location uncertain), with people deported from 12 Greek cities that he had conquered. The number of deportees involved ranges as high as 300,000 (Appian, *Mithridatica* 67). Pliny, too, mentions residents of Adiabene and Assyria (northern Iraq) and Gordyene (eastern Turkey) forcibly removed to Tigranocerta (*Natural History* 6.142). Later Armenian accounts of the deportation to Armenia of the Jewish population of Palestine must be viewed with considerable skepticism (Shahbazi et al. 1994).

### *Deportation as means of development*

The Sassanians (c.224–640 CE) used deportation as a technique of populating and developing areas of strategic interest. After his conquest of Antioch in Syria, Shapur I (r. 240–70 CE) deported thousands of “Romans” (most likely a mixture of eastern Greeks and Syrians from Antioch and the environs) to Assyria, Parthia (northeastern Iran and western Turkmenistan), Persis (modern Fars province, southwest Iran), and Khuzestan (southwesternmost Iran). According to later sources (e.g. Tabari 838–923 CE), the deportees included not only soldiers and the Christian bishop of Antioch (as well as many Christians), but military engineers who were put to work building dams, weirs, and other irrigation works to better develop the agricultural regime of southwestern Iran (the Band-e Qaysar or “Caesar’s weir” at Shushtar is thought to have been built by the engineers of the captured Roman emperor Valerian). The city of Gundeshapur is said to have been largely built by these deportees (Shahbazi et al. 1994).

In time Khuzestan came to have a predominantly Christian population, in part the result of Shapur I’s deportations. In the 4th century CE Shapur II also deported a sizable number of Christians (out of 9,000 men and women) from Bezabde in southeastern Turkey to Khuzestan. Reverse deportations also occurred. Tabari says that Shapur II shifted 12,000 people

from Istakhr (near Shiraz) and Isfahan to Nusaybin in southeastern Turkey after the city was ceded to him by Jovian in 363 CE. Later deportations are also attested in the 5th and 6th centuries, some involving rebellious Armenians who were moved by Yazdegerd II (r.438–57) to Nishapur in northeastern Iran. In his war with Byzantium, Khusraw I conquered and virtually depopulated Apamea and Daras in Syria in 573, sending enormous numbers – 90,000 according to Michael the Syrian; 292,000 according to John of Ephesus – to unstated destinations. When Khusraw II conquered Jerusalem in 614 he is said by the Armenian historian Sebeos to have captured 57,000 people and deported 35,000 of them to Ctesiphon, the Sassanian capital in Iraq (near modern Baghdad). In many cases, contemporary and later sources suggest that families and groups from individual towns and cities were allowed to remain together in their new settlements, sometimes in wards or neighborhoods created exclusively for them. Accounts of mistreatment also occur. Elderly or lame prisoners who could not manage these long journeys on foot were sometimes abandoned, their calf or hamstring muscles cut so that they could not return to their homes (Shapur I; Shahbazi et al. 1994).

Although deportation was practiced by Timur (Tamerlane) (r.1370–1405), it was not a feature of the earlier Islamic dynasties in Iran. Timur carried out a number of deportations. After his conquest of Tabriz (northwestern Iran) he deported craftsmen, scholars, and artisans to Samarkand (in modern Uzbekistan). Timur's defeat of the Ottomans in 1403 led to a deportation of 30,000–40,000 Qara Tatar nomads from Amasya and Qaysariya in Turkey toward Central Asia, though many of these were killed en route following an uprising at Damghan in northeastern Iran (Shahbazi et al. 1994).

### Persian deportations, 16th–18th centuries

Deportations became much more common, however, in the 16th–18th centuries CE. Beginning with Shah Abbas I (r.1587–1629) we see the use of deportation as a defensive measure

in imperial realpolitik designed to depopulate border areas, shift potential enemies from a position in which they could ally themselves with another power, and fortify distant regions against incursions by outside forces. Thus in c.1600 Shah Abbas moved thousands of Kurds away from his border with the Ottomans enemy, both to prevent their forming an alliance with his enemy and to fortify Khorasan (northeastern Iran) against raids by the Uzbeks. He did the same with many tribesmen in the southern Caucasus whom he resettled in the east, often destroying crops, buildings, and infrastructure and pursuing a “scorched earth” policy as he depopulated western regions adjacent to the Ottoman frontier. As many as 3,000 Armenian families were transported from the area around Julfa, on the Araxes river, in northwestern Iran, to Isfahan, both as a consequence of Shah Abbas' drive to depopulate the region and make it unusable for the Ottomans, and in order to stimulate commerce and viticulture in and around his new capital further south (Perry 1975).

Deportations were vigorously pursued by Nadir Shah (r.1736–47), often involving thousands of Baluchi, Uzbek, Turkmen, and Afghan tribesmen. Much of this energy was expended in a drive to break the power of the tribes and involved large numbers: 56,000 assorted tribesmen were moved from Azerbaijan (northwestern Iran), central Iran and Fars (southwestern Iran) to the northeast in 1730; 60,000 Abdali tribesmen were moved from Afghanistan to northeastern Iran in 1738; 13,000 Bakhtiari tribesmen were moved from Kurdistan in 1732 and 1736 to northeastern Iran and Turkmenistan (Perry 1975: 209). Many of these tribes returned to their former lands after Nadir Shah's death, but deportations continued, involving thousands of tribesmen, under later rulers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries such as Karim Khan Zand (r.1751–79) and Agha Muhammad Khan Qajar (r.1784–97). It is notable that the vast bulk of the deportations effected by these later rulers, from Shah Abbas I onward, involved nomadic tribesmen who, as mobile, paramilitary forces, presented both a threat and an opportunity (to defend against other powers). Deportations of sedentary populations

seem to have been of less concern and in this respect the earlier deportations aimed at breaking local resistance and transplanting economically useful communities differ from those of the later periods.

SEE ALSO: Diasporas and colonization in Classical Antiquity; Greek colonization movement, 8th–6th centuries BCE; Greek migrations and colonies, ancient era; Peninsular India and the Bay of Bengal, mobility and travel, 4th century BCE to 8th century CE; Traders and exiles, medieval era

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